

## Customer Service

### Preparation Information



# Navigating Customer Services

**I**T'S a complaint every receptionist has heard: "Please don't send me elsewhere; I've already spoken with neighbors and left messages on three voice machines; the operator gave me your number as the office to handle this, and you're the only live person I've been able to reach."

## Welcome to the Community

Those of us who live and work on military installations often overlook the fact that these bases possess the characteristics of a small town or city, and that a garrison commander is like a town mayor with many supporting activities. Our bases operate fire and police departments, swimming pools, day care centers, gymnasiums, youth clubs, hospitals, community clubs, craft shops and chapels. They are "landlords" to post exchanges, offices, schools, commissaries, movie theaters, post offices and private quarters. They also publish newspapers;



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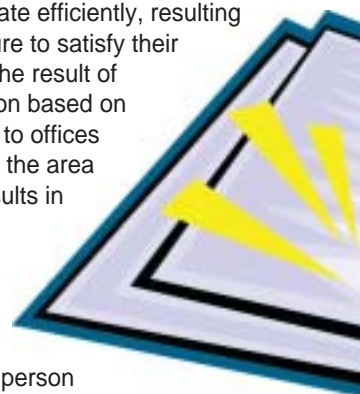
provide electrical, water and sewer services; run airfields; and maintain training areas and recreational lands — and the list goes on from there.

Problems surface as people seeking services on a military base fail to navigate efficiently, resulting in frustration and even failure to satisfy their needs. This pitfall is often the result of seeking information or action based on undefined goals presented to offices that are not responsible for the area concerned. That in turn results in people receiving referrals, speculative advice and incorrect or incomplete opinions. Quite often, "I have a problem!" is not a problem at all, but rather a person seeking information about a program or benefit.

## A Simple Solution?

Before contacting offices, determine what is needed to accomplish your objective. This sounds like a simple act, but often it can't be translated into a concise goal for resolution. If several issues are involved, recognize them and be ready to identify each of them and their relationship to each other, and realize the possibility that they may require separate points of contact for resolution.

Once the goal (what needs to be done) and related issues are identified, focus on what office or person within an agency, post, command, organiza-



tion or civilian community has the primary responsibility to act upon the matter in question.

Again, this sounds routine, but those who don't zero in on the office responsible for handling their problem often encounter a frustrating cycle of improper appointments, referrals or delays, and the cycle soon affects others as overflowing mail boxes and redirected calls inhibit distracted employees from offering their best service.

## It's a "Supermarket" Thing

Face it: Our fast paced lifestyle has conditioned us to seek instant service. Having encountered huge supermarkets that offer not just food but also pharmacy items, clothing and much more, we soon become conditioned to expect all of our needs to be satisfied by "one-stop shopping." This expectation has been reinforced by our vast shopping malls, and now we have the Internet "communications super highway" that leads us to expect immediate replies to every request we make.

When voice mail or other obstacles intervene, we become impatient and switch to another person or office rather than wait. Then the frustration is compounded when our calls are finally answered but the person we have reached can't help us because we didn't take time to identify the office responsible for answering our questions.

## Why is Service So Bad?

Such misdirected inquiries also frustrate the people in the offices being called. For example, questions received in a single week by the Fort Belvoir, Va., legal office included requests for information on hold baggage shipments, pet-immunization requirements, the location of TRICARE providers, and procedures for mailing firearms and obtaining new military ID cards and passports.

As much as employees may want to help every customer, legal assistance personnel are not the experts in any of these areas, and taking time to find answers or redirect callers to the proper agency takes valuable time and frustrates other clients who are waiting for appointments or service.

No one likes to give or receive incorrect advice or lengthy explanations and apologies for why help is not available. By focusing on which office is most likely to provide the help you seek, you can eliminate much of this frustration — for yourself and for those who are trying to help you.



## Information, Please

Luckily, finding the right office generally isn't as difficult as it may first seem. Many installations publish post directories that can help you find the office that can help. In the directories, you'll find advice for newly arriving personnel, telephone lists of

services and facilities on post, helpful information about on-post recreation facilities and local entertainment venues, and maps of the post and surrounding areas. Since these directories are supported by advertising, they most likely will also contain a shoppers' guide or index with ads from local businesses that cater to military customers. If you don't have a directory, contact your post public affairs office to get a copy.

Many installations also put directory information on their Web sites, where it can be frequently updated so the information is kept current. If you don't know the Web address for your installation, you can find it by visiting the Army Home Page at [www.army.mil](http://www.army.mil) and selecting the Quick Link "Army A-Z."



## Come Prepared

Now that you've found the right office and made your appointment, be sure to arrive at your meeting prepared with all of the facts and documents necessary to do business. If a lease contract is in dispute, bring the lease. If an estate or will is to be prepared, come with the correct spelling of the names of the persons who will be the executor, beneficiaries, guardians and trustees. It is a waste of time for a client to appear without relevant information or to be undecided about who will be the beneficiaries of their estate, and such a lack of planning just guarantees they will have to make another appointment.

As staffing shortages increase, it is critical that we all follow these few simple suggestions in order to maintain adequate customer services, achieve productive results and eliminate navigating frustrations for all. □

